

HOSANNA

The Advent Greeting

A Sermon by Prof. William Horbury in S. Botolph's, Cambridge
at the Sung Eucharist on Advent Sunday

30th November 2014

The Gospel for Advent Sunday is S. Matthew 21.1-13, describing the advent, or coming, of our Lord to Jerusalem and the temple, before his arrest and crucifixion.

Matthew 21.9 Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest.

Hosanna: with this word we greet the Advent or Coming of our Lord — at his birth in the Holy Land, in the time to come, and now in the present in our hearts and minds.

Hosanna may be the most familiar of all our Advent texts, because of its inclusion in the liturgy. In the Eucharist 'Hosanna in the highest' rounds off our Sanctus — Holy, holy, holy — when the service is sung. These words are unprinted in the present Prayer-book, but they take us back, as if by a kind of folk-memory, to the first English Prayer-book of 1549, where they are indeed to be found.

But when we hear Hosanna read in the Gospel for Advent Sunday we sense that we are travelling back in time far behind our own old but still relatively modern liturgy in English, back

through the ages when the church in the west prayed in Latin, back through the still earlier time of the early Roman empire, when the prayers were in Greek, back to the time of the earliest Christians who still used, or were very close to, prayer in Hebrew and Aramaic. Hosanna goes together with two other words of extreme age which are really Hebrew words surviving in Christian liturgy: Amen, and Alleluia.

In S. Matthew's Gospel the multitudes cry Hosanna as our Lord comes — makes his advent — down the slope of the Mount of Olives and into the holy city. The children cry it again, with their penetrating sing-song, when he actually enters the temple. And we see — or rather hear — that in the gospel itself we still haven't got quite to the beginning of this Advent cry. Somehow it was already familiar to the disciples and the multitudes. Hosanna is being used by them as a familiar acclamation.

We recall then that Hosanna is indeed already found as a festal cry in one of the Psalms, Psalm 118 *O give thanks unto the Lord ...:*

Save us now, O Lord: O Lord, send us now prosperity.

Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord.

The English represents Hebrew which does indeed sound like a chant in the temple, a chant of earnest petition and joy:

anna Adonai hoshi'anna, anna Adonai hatslihanna. I don't usually quote Hebrew in the pulpit, but to-day it seems admissible in order to give an idea of the urgency and compelling character of

the words. The form Hosianna with an I, a little closer to the Hebrew, is found in some English versions of Philip Nicolai's Advent hymn, 'Wake O wake for night is flying'.

This psalm was sung at the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn, when the weather begins to change and prayer in the Holy Land is made for the urgently-needed rain. At this festival they carried green branches of myrtle and willow and cried Save us now, O Lord — Hoshi'anna, Hosanna. At this word in particular, they waved and shook their branches.

This custom was adapted in the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem, and is still echoed in our own palm processions on Palm Sunday. What was originally a petition — Save us! — had by the time of Christ taken on the overtones of an acclamation — Salvation! Compare Ps. 3:8 'Salvation belongeth unto the Lord!', and the way the petition 'God save the Queen' is also used as an acclamation. Compare too the song of the great multitude in heaven in the book of Revelation: 'Salvation to our God who sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb' (Rev. 7.10).

So my much-loved predecessor Charlie Wood, Rector of S. Botolph's 1940-1961, who was a Hebraist, suggested in an article in 1941 that one possible meaning of 'Hosanna to the son of David' was 'Salvation belongs to the son of David'. The substance of this sermon may then very well have been preached from this pulpit before, but if so it was just too soon for me to hear it.

So now again our Advent is focused in the cry Hosanna, Save us, Salvation. We greet the Advent or coming of Christ — his

advent in his birth long ago, in the time to come, and in our hearts at the present moment — with the joyful acclamatory cry of Hosanna, Salvation! But, as we also remember our own need to prepare for his coming, we utter also the humble petition:
Hosanna, Save us.